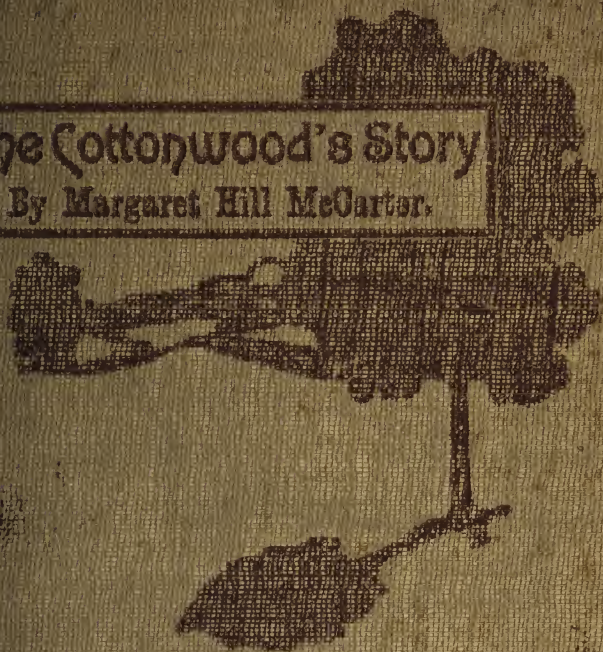



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The Cottonwood's Story

By Margaret Hill McCarter.





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THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

BY
MARGARET HILL McCARTER

Illustrations by Lydia Wehe Crabill

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The Cottonwood's Story.



TELL it just as the cottonwood told it to me. I made my peace with trees long ago. They are my cool sure friends, never moody nor wayward nor unfaithful. I listen to their gentle messages, and I know that Ruskin, or whoever it may have been, was right when he said:

“There is something more than ‘wood to hew’ in the forests that cover the mountains like the shadow of God; something more than ‘water to draw’ in the rivers that move like His eternity.”

I lived days and days with the cottonwood, and it told me all the story. Only my translation is harsh

29 Dec 48 HBM

Gen. res. Hansen 10 Dec 48 Wenden

T H E C O T T O N W O O D ' S S T O R Y

and barren of beauty. If you heard it yourself you would catch the pattering sound of leaves, so like rain-drops on dry roofs in the summer-time, the rippling glint of glossy green color, the moan of twisting white branches before the storm, and even the soft spirit-music of drifting cotton that sounds only into ears that listen for its noiseless melody. The great tree spoke, and this is the tale it told.



Leafless Boughs.



WIND - SWEPT prairie that rippled away into the purple distance. Shallow streams lying like thin ribbons flung carelessly across the landscape. Shifting gold and green and crimson, and the steel-blue line of the stone outcrop coloring the earth. A brazen, cloudless sky, with a wonderful tinting of pink along its sunset rim.—These were what I saw when I first peeped over the brow of that slope. The gossipy breezes told of coyotes and wolves and westward-moving lines of Indians, but I never caught a glimpse of them; nor did I grow sad at the sighing loneliness of

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the winds moaning for the glory and power lost when they came eastward. The big, bulgy-headed tumbleweeds took them seriously, and rolled helplessly down to that long draw away below my feet, where the October prairie-fires always found them.

But I ever loved this place, and, sheltered from the north by that swell of ground, my head above the slope so that all the wide plain was before me, my feet deep in the earth where the unfailing cisterns are,—trust a cottonwood to find their secretest hiding-places,—I flung my bare young branches upward and caught the light and warm sweet air. And when the northeast rains sobbed and wept for the great lakes they missed so much, and when the northwest blizzard curled and uncurled its

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long whiplashes of fierce, cutting cold; and most of all, when the hot south blasts came singing, singing of the scorched distant plain, I let them all pass by me without ever wishing to go where they had been and to see what they had seen. All the sap in my veins was tingling with hope and belief in my own country, and I bent before the rain and the cold and the heat; but I never broke,—not I.

And one day Sam came.

I knew him by no other name in all the years that followed, nor his people except as Sam's folks. The East Wind said that Sam's father had chronic liver complaint, his mother chronic laziness, and his brothers and sisters more or less of both. But then the East Wind likes

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to talk ill of people. It is the fault-finder of the air.

The folks came in a funny scoopy-topped covered wagon; they drove a horse and a mule, and behind the wagon was a brown brindled cow and under the wagon a brown brindled dog. And all of them, the folks, the horse and the mule, the brown cow and the brown dog, and even little Sam himself, turned browner and took root and became a part of the soil at my feet. They would have been safe from the eye of Indian or wild beast, for their color scheme was perfect.

They burrowed into the earth and made a home for themselves, and covered it over with prairie sod and called it a dugout. They scratched a little at the rich soil, and corn and

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weeds grew together in the scratches. They fished and trapped, and in the hot summer days they lay where my shadows covered them, and slept away the hours. They were a trifling lot, the breezy West Wind thought, and they talked much of going back home to Missouri; but they never went. At first I wished they might do it, but later I came to love them in spite of themselves.

I was growing taller all the time, and I could see farther and farther across the plains. There are seven towns and villages in sight now, besides that big city over there, with its round-topped dome forever watching the valley.

How I have loved the people who filled up this land! For them I sent my children far and wide, and wher-

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ever these children took root the early comers knew there was living water. For them the cottonwood was shelter and lumber and firewood and wind-break. For them it was the symbol of vigor and sturdy persistence. For them it coaxed the rain from unpitying skies. It stood up fearless in storm or drouth, a thing to weather all changes. It sent out its sympathetic spirit to the aching, homesick hearts longing for the woodlands far away in the East.

The whole countryside is checkered with freeholds now, but in those days I can recall the first hamlet, so far and far away. I remember as if it had been only yesterday the long lines of white-covered wagons that crossed my prairie, the first cornfields, the fenced-in farms and

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the roads settling straight and definite where the trails had only straggled aimlessly. I remember the first little church-spire, and not very long after that the little red school-house where the river trail and the long southwest trail crossed each other. The air was always clear to me around that school-house, and I could look into its two small south windows every day.

But Sam's folks cared nothing for all this. They kept on the other side of the divide. None of them could read; the brothers didn't want to and the sisters didn't need to.

"Girls don't haf to have no learnin'," Sam's mother said, "an' the boys are cute enough already."

Little Sam used to climb up into my strong boughs and hug me close.

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He was lonely, for the other children were almost men and women, and the few neighbors were miles away from one another. Sam was a happy brownie, but when he had worn out all of the games he could invent he would come running to me with outstretched hands and nestle down among my thin branches. Then he would cry foolish tears that didn't know why they came. You see that bend up there in my big right arm? It just fitted Sam's head when he curled himself up like a cat on the limbs. I have always loved children. It is the business of trees to do that, but I was younger then, and little brown Sam was the only child I knew. I was especially fond of him, for he was my first love. He told me all his secrets, and I came

to know as much of the inside of that dugout as if I had lived in it.

The folks were very poor, and in the nippy winter weather they were often cold and hungry. But they wasted the fine summer days when crops grow for the mere cultivation; so they just managed to live from year to year, contented when they were comfortable and growling when they weren't. Only Sam had a child's heart-sickness that nobody knew of except myself.

One cold winter-time Sam saved my life. The father had gone to mill a long, long way to the east, and the brothers were too lazy to provide wood for the fire. They had to do something to keep from freezing, so they decided to try me. "Green cottonwood is better than no wood

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at all," they declared, as they sharpened their axes with saliva and a "whet-rock," as they called it. I shivered in every fiber when they came near, but I had not reckoned on little Sam. He bounded in front of them and climbed clear into my swaying icy top, and there he clung. The brothers coaxed and threatened and swore, but it had no effect on Sam.

"You sha'n't cut down my tree. If you do, I'll go down with it," was all he would say.

The boys gave up at last, and sawed up the posts their father had just planted for the clothesline to be fastened upon. Sam came in and sat by their fire and warmed himself with a contented heart.

One day, when he was up in the

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higher branches looking out with lonely eyes across the sweep of land, he spied the red school-house. How his heart thumped against my smooth bark as he watched the boys and girls come out of its door and dwindle away across the prairie to their humble homes. Sam looked after them as long as he could see them. Then he sat among the boughs and watched the sun go down the west and all the rich purple tints of evening fill the land. He had no eye for this beauty. Sunset meant only supper-time to him, yet its quiet influence was upon him nevertheless. The few twinkling lamps in the distant houses shone like earth-stars in the misty gray softness of the twilight, and the boy wondered if the stars above might

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not be the lamps about which the happy souls in heaven sit together in family groups through the long evenings of eternity. The soft air, warm and moist out of the west, rippled about Sam's head and kissed his fuzzy brown hair. He climbed slowly to the ground, and entered the dugout with the emphatic declaration:

"Dad, I'm goin' to go to school!"



Budding Days.



HERE was a tempest, not in a teapot, but in a dug-out, before Sam's intention was realized. His mother, in her lazy way, took it as a sort of insult that her son should have an intellectual ambition.

"You couldn't beat learnin' into no Missourian's head, not with a willer club soaked in potash," she said; and she ordered Sam to stay at home.

"He'll git a misery in his side walkin' so fur, jist like I've had all these years," his father put in complainingly; and he added a mild entreaty "not to go potterin' 'round no school."

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"Sam's a fool and a ejit," the brothers and sisters declared. And the little boy, thoroughly disheartened, went to bed.

But something in the springiness of the morning air put thrills into Sam's muscles when he awoke the next day. After breakfast he slipped a piece of corn bread into his pocket and came out and leaned against me.

"I'm goin' up to the top of the divide," he said. "If the wind's from the north I'll stay at home. If it's from the south it'll blow me right down to that school-house whether Dad and Mam want it or not. I'm not goin' to stay on the edge of that draw down there forever."

There was a ripple of laughter in

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every budding twig, for the South Wind was singing through the upper branches. Little Sam from the top of the swell waved his arms at me and trudged away before it, whistling like a mocking-bird.

I watched the red school-house all that day, and I was one quiver of eagerness for the little brownie's home-coming. But I might have known that neither the father nor the mother had energy enough to make more than a feeble protest. They would have done no more if their boy had been going headlong into sin.

"Let him alone," the mother said, as the easiest way out of it all. "Let him alone an' he'll git tired of it soon enough."

And so he did. Not of the chil-

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dren, nor of the life—real, active, busy life—in the red school-house on the other side of the slope; but learning came hard, and Sam had nothing to help him. That dreary, dirty dugout was a poor sort of home, even when two rooms had been built in a crazy fashion in front of it. When Sam's father went seriously to work, his liver was sure to get troublesome. Things stayed half completed for months round that little freehold. And idleness does not make people happy. The whole atmosphere at my feet was one of discomfort.

Sam had no encouragement to study, no sympathetic interest in his efforts, and no inherent mentality nor inbred sense of order. Nobody except myself knew how dreadful

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those days were for the boy. Trees do not need words to understand children. We take in their thoughts as we do light and air — through all our open leaf-pores.

Sam wanted knowledge and he wanted the fellowship of the children, but he could not learn the hard lessons in books; so he gave up trying, and stayed at home. He was dropping into the family way out of which the days in the red school-house had lifted him a little, when one afternoon I saw the teacher coming up the road toward me. She kept her eyes on me and I heard her say,

“He always came over the hill by that cottonwood tree.”

Then I knew she was looking for Sam, and I waved my boughs in

courtesy to her. She rested for a moment here when she had topped the divide, and here Sam saw her. He came shyly at her call, and the two talked together for a long time. She was not pretty, nor graceful, nor stylish. Her face was freckled and her hair was genuinely red. But her gray eyes were full of light and her smile was kindly and sweet. She was just a plain, breezy, intelligent country girl, and she had a notion that teaching school is a high calling, helping the children of these pioneer people into what Saint Paul calls "The life that *is* life." She didn't tell Sam this, for he could not yet comprehend the life that *isn't* life.

She went with him down to the house, and ate supper in the kitchen

dugout. Her shrewdness in meeting the folks would have done credit to what men under that dome over there call "a political mixer." They all praised her after she went away, and they were less indifferent to Sam's mental progress than they had been, although none of them could help him.

It is wonderful what the little red school-house may put into a boy's life when the little red-headed school-ma'am puts her soul into her work. Watching Sam from day to day, nobody noted the change wrought in him. Only I, the cottonwood, saw the budding promise of his mind. Trees understand all about slow growths. They look farther and feel deeper than people do. And sometimes, when the

teacher herself was discouraged over this poor ignorant child, I alone knew the steady unfolding power by which my little brown boy was coming into his kingdom.

One winter day it came my turn to do for Sam what he had done for me when he climbed into my topmost branches and kept his brothers from cutting me into firewood. There had been days of warm, wet January weather, so sultry that fires were a burden. When Sam came from school in the evening he found his mother full of complaining. Her clothesline posts—shaky, rotten sticks—had broken under the weight of the week's wash, and all the garments had fallen into the mud.

"Sam," said his mother as he came into the steamy, wet kitchen, full of

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the week's laundry, "Sam, can't you fix me a line that will stay put? I'm plumb done up tryin' to fool with them rotten poles."

Sam went out after supper and fastened one end of the rope securely to the low corner of the new shed on my side of the house. The other he knotted with a tie of his own invention round my lowest limb. Then he told his mother that her clothesline troubles were over.

The next afternoon a blizzard came whirling out of the northwest, and twilight settled down in the middle of the afternoon. The scholars were sent away early. Only Sam stayed with the teacher until all the children were safely housed. It was dark when the two were left alone. Sam's home was nearer than the

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teacher's, and together they tried to reach it. The snow came in great flapping, swirling sheets, the cold cut like splintered glass, and the wind from every point of the compass beat the earth with the fury of a demon.

I watched the two struggling up through the pathless drifts, wandering wide of the way and circling round and round until they lost their bearings altogether and did not know where they were. I moaned aloud and tossed up my white arms in agony. But they could not see me, and in the thick of the storm I lost them. I bowed my head before the gale, and felt the sleet glazing every twig. Suddenly a cold hand clutched my lower bough, and Sam's voice cried cheerily:

"I do believe it's my cottonwood

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tree. Hold fast to me. I'll know it by the clothesline. If I can find that, it will take us to the house."

I held down every limb to guide him to the rope, and soon he and his teacher were safe inside the little shelter.

I cannot tell you of all that came and went in those years of Sam's schooling. But one day he said to his father and mother,

"I'm going to the High School in town."

"We just can't spare you no more," his father said. All the brothers and sisters had homes of their own now, patterned very much after the parental roof.

"You've got all the schoolin' you need to run this ranch," his mother declared.

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So the old battle had to be fought over again. It was hot August weather, and Sam slept every night on the ground at my feet. On this night he climbed high up among my branches and watched the moon come out of the east and fill all the prairie with an exquisite glory. No wooded land nor broken mountain region ever gets the full splendor of the moonlight as the open prairie does,—the radiance that is softer than sunlight and richer than starlight. And no tree ever sheds off that chastened glory like the glistening, silvery green of the cottonwood's leaves. Something of my spirit thrilled through Sam's spirit as he looked out on the plain I had rejoiced in year after year.

“Over there's the High School,”

he said, bending his head to the north, "and I'm going to go there."

His mouth had a determined line about it that was marked on no other face among Sam's folks.

And he did go. Through objections and obstructions for four years longer his schooling lasted. And one night he came home with a diploma tied in white and green.

"Class colors," he told his mother, who "allowed" that the *green* was all right enough, but where was the sense in the *white*?

After that came the hardest battle in all Sam's life—the struggle where gaining is losing. Sam wanted to go to the University. It had been his dream in the High School to follow a profession. High schools put such notions into a boy's head. In the



very springtime of his manhood his ambition was for completer education.

This time he met with no opposition at home. His parents said not a word against his wishes. The strife was all within himself. He could have worked his way through college easily enough. That wasn't the point. Old age was now upon the father and mother — old age for which they had never made provision. Among the married children one of the boys was dead, one had gone wrong, and the third was living in the same shiftless way his father had done. The girls were both heads of households now, one in Missouri and the other in far-away Oregon.

Sam was the only prop the parents had in their growing feebleness. If

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he should go to the University he could do no more than to maintain himself. In all the years he could remember, his home had done so little for him that his very soul rebelled against the claim it had now upon his time and strength. And yet the claim was there, and the struggle in the boy's mind was terrible.

I shall never forget the day that conflict ended. Sam had risen early, before the twilight gloom had left the draw. He came up the slope where the dawn first breaks, and leaned against my trunk and watched the magnificent splendor of the new day swing grandly out of the horizon, and felt the sweet cool breeze that freshens all the slumbering land at

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waking-time, and heard the musical twitterings of the bird-songs.

On the dim sun-kissed heights far to the southeast stood the University; down in the shadowy gloom at his feet was his home and his father and mother, to whom he felt that he owed so little; and yet they were his father and mother. In the bitterness of his spirit he wrenched a young limb from my trunk. The scar is there still. So is the scar on his heart. At last he gave one long, agonizing look at the distant east where the college domes were dimly outlined against the pink heavens. Then master of himself, he turned toward his home. The shadows were all gone now; the new day with its new work was before him. He looked no more to the eastward, but

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resolutely put his hand to the task
and his shoulder to the burden, and
followed the way that daily opened
before him.



Blossom Time.



KNOW how you would tell this story. You would idealize, for you have imagination, and you would end with putting Sam in the Presidential chair. Trees can only hold to the tale that writes itself out about them. And while the way "from the towpath to the White House" is a possibility, the East Wind tells me that not one boy out of a million who follows the towpath is on the particular one that leads to the White House. Sam's school days were ended when he left the High School; and I tell you what I know, not what I dream of. I said before, that trees

understand all about slow growths. Sam was only a boy, and all his development had really come from the other side of the slope. No wonder his heart failed when he looked at his father's farm. Broken fences trailing around fields luxuriant with weeds, shabby stock of low breeding, tumble-down stables, and an unpainted, unadorned dwelling-house. A complaining, sickly father, and a feeble, querulous mother, resenting change or innovation above all things. An upside-down bank account, and no experience in self-reliant direction of affairs. These were what Sam had to face when he turned his back on the University and cast his lot with his parents.

How slow the work of reclaiming a neglected farm is! It takes so

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many furrows to break up all the soil of the field, so many strokes to build up or repair dilapidated sheds and fences, so much time and effort to restock a place with improved breeds of cattle and horses and hogs. Slowly the wave of improvement crept across the freehold. Patiently the young man put into his day the results of the discipline and inspiration of his years at school, but he could not note the development about him, it was so gradual.

At the end of five years the whole scene was changed. Only the inside of the home under the mother's control was still unlovely in its plainness and shiftless disorder. Sam had failed to make any progress here. He didn't know how to go about such things. All he did know

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was that he had conquered the weeds, and that the long, even rows of corn, the fruitful orchard, and the sleek animals tempted him to an outdoor life. He wanted vines and flowers, but his mother thought otherwise, and Sam could do nothing there. In fact, his days were so short and so full of care that he had little time for missing any of the pleasures. Neighbors praised the young man behind his back, and his father and mother charged it all to their "bringin' up," but they had few compliments for their son. It is the way of parents to see their own reflection in their good children, but to forget to praise merit if it is in a blood relation.

For two years Sam had been a regular attendant at the country church

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whose low spire first looked skyward in all my prairie, now marked by many spires. He sang tenor in the choir, with the minister's sweet-faced daughter leading the soprano. Her name was Nellie, and Sam thought it the prettiest name ever given to a girl. Once in a while the choir practiced at the minister's home. Sam always felt a cold shiver go over him when he came into his mother's domain after an evening at Nellie's house.

Once in a while, too, he walked home with Nellie from choir practice at other places. One moonlit evening he never forgot. The young people had played and sung until late. The road to the minister's house was a long one. The dewy night was wonderfully still and beautiful. Did

Sam dream it, or did Nellie really let some offers of company escape her as if she wanted him for an escort? Sam could not tell. He only knew that he had never seen a night so delicious. Their way led by his home. When they reached me Nellie paused, and, leaning against my bark, she clasped and unclasped her hands a little, hesitatingly. She plucked a twig from a branch and turned it between her fingers. Then she said softly:

“Sam, everybody says you are a very good boy, and that you deserve great credit for your kindness to your parents. I think you are good.”

Sam looked down toward the house in silence. His father and mother had been more than ordinarily trying in the past few days. It seemed

to him that when he tried to please them he only made them more irritable and exacting. Like a flash it came to his mind what life would mean with such a girl as Nellie to rule a home! He clutched at my lower bough, and said nothing. Then Nellie spoke again:

“It’s none of my business, Sam, and I oughtn’t to say it, but I am glad you are kind to your father and mother. You don’t mind my saying it, do you?”

Sam gripped my bark with his great strong hands.

“Of course not, Nellie,” he said hoarsely. It was the sweetest reward he had ever known. “I wish things were different down there, but I do the best I can.” Then, with the overmastering love in his heart

shining out through his eyes he added, "I 'm glad you said that, Nellie."

Sam stopped his plow in the furrow the next day, and leaning on its handles he recalled all that had taken place on the night before.

His eye was bright and his step buoyant when he came in to dinner. There was no meal ready and nobody in sight. Passing into the front room, he found his father yellow-gray with fever. Complaining had been so habitual to him that Sam had hardly noticed his recent decline. Now that his father was stricken, the boy's conscience smote him fiercely, as if his neglect might have caused it all.

The days that followed were always as a horrible nightmare to

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Sam's memory. Nursing the sick, cooking his own meals, caring for the stock and tending the growing crop filled every moment of his waking hours; and his waking hours filled up three-fourths of the twenty-four.

The mother soon gave way before the burden of it all. She had never in her life met and resisted any trying thing, so Sam's care was doubled. The thought of Nellie and every other pleasant memory went out of his mind entirely, and only dread and weariness and persistent struggle remained for him.

The neighbors were very kind, and did many kind services for the family. But their own work must go on, and the father and mother

were both alike in refusing ministrations from any hand but Sam's.

April and May slipped by, and now it was mid-June. One night in the busiest of wheat harvest Sam watched alone with the two shattered wrecks of humanity. Just at midnight his father said, feebly:

"Sam, I've never done much for you. You've been a good boy to me an' mother. Some day you'll git your reward."

He turned his face away, but not before he caught Sam's low reply:

"I've had my reward already."

A little later the mother called:

"Sam, oh, Sam, I'm so weak! Take care of him — good-by." She pointed feebly toward the father, and was gone.

The young man bent over his

father's form. A smile was on his face, but his eyes saw nothing earthly any more forever.

In the soft still darkness of the night Sam groped his way up to me and leaned, numb and cold, against my trunk. Then, as in his boyhood when he was my little brownie, he climbed up and rested among my branches and laid his head in the bend of my right arm.

In the early morning the Doctor came, and later came the neighbors. Two days afterward all the countryside turned out after its fashion, only more numerous because this was a double funeral. Since the death of his parents Sam had been like a figure cast in bronze, so strange and meaningless were all the hours to him now. He did not hear

the minister's prayer. He did not note who made up the crowd, nor how loud and noisy was the lament put up by his shiftless older brother and his wife. This brother and sister-in-law, living two townships away, had been too busy to come home more than once during the family sickness. To-day Sam hardly knew of their presence, so paralyzed were his powers. It was only when Nellie's voice began the hymn,

“Abide with me. Fast falls the eventide,”
that his numbness slipped away and a burning fever filled his veins.

He came home from the burial, and walked into the house. After that he knew nothing for many days. When he came to himself again his old home seemed to have vanished with the mother who ruled it, and

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a sweet, orderly cleanliness surrounded him. A neighbor-woman whose house was always full of children and whose face was always full of cheer (she said the children kept that in it) was moving softly about.

"How could you do all this?" Sam asked, feebly raising his hand.

"Oh, I had help," the woman replied. There was a tonic in her very voice. "The preacher's girl come nearly every day to tidy up. Your ma was sick so long things got run down."

In a little while Nellie came in. Sam looked at her eagerly. He had a feeling that if she would only stay with him there would always be red salvia on the clock-shelf and a bowl of purple-and-gold pansies on the center-table. But she had only come

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to bring some books for him to read when he grew stronger. Yes, she would come again when papa could come with her; and she went away. She did come again, as did a dozen of the other neighbor-girls.

A little later a buxom, gossipy, good-natured widow came to keep house for Sam, and by degrees he fitted himself into his old lines of work again.

The next spring, when my red blossomy catkins with invisible fingers clung to my branches or lay in little velvet rolls on the brown grasses at my feet, Sam and Nellie stood in the golden evening-light and looked out on the prairie I have watched over and loved so long.

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The odor of freshly plowed ground was in the air. The orchards were pink with their burden of bloom. All the land was rippling with life and color, over which the sunset cast its indefinable radiance, melting into softer tones as the moments slipped away. How changed the scene about me from the one I had looked on in the days of the first settlers! But no more changed than this splendidly built young man from the little brownie who years before had played at my feet with that brindled dog that had tagged the family all the way from Missouri. There were lines in Sam's face that the cares of his years had graven there. They gave a certain manly seriousness to his countenance.

Looking down at the fair young girl beside him, he said:

“Nellie, I’ve loved this old tree since I was a child. I always climbed up on that crooked limb to have the blues. I was sitting here the first time I ever saw the school-house and determined to go to school. I followed the clothesline trail from here to the kitchen once when I was lost in a blizzard. I was here when I made up my mind to take the High-School course in town. I stood up here one time and gave up the University notion; and I came out to this tree the night my father and mother died. This is my battleground, you see.

“Nellie,” (how tender his voice was!) “I want you to be my wife,

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

and I can ask you better here than I could anywhere else, because I am not worthy of you; and if you do not love me, tell me so here. This old cottonwood is my next of kin."

I shook my little wine-red rolls of bloom down on Nellie's crown of sunny hair, and gently brushed her cheek with falling flowers. She looked up into Sam's face and smiled. I shall never forget that smile.

"Tell your next of kin," she said archly, "that it has a rival now, for I'm going to stay with you and share your warfare."

A sudden after-sunset glory in the west, a sweep of soft south-wind, a musical break of bird's-song somewhere up the sky, and Sam and

BLOSSOM TIME

Nellie passed down the grassy way to the house, thinking as men and women have ever done, that their love was rarer and sweeter than any other loves since time began.



Rustling Leaves.



FROM all the ways my cotton blows I gather that many books are written to tell of the joy of life on the farm.

“If the books were not written,” the East Wind says, “nobody on the farm would ever find out about the joy. It’s all in the books.”

I don’t mind the East Wind: I like it. It isn’t a zephyr from the south; but then it doesn’t pretend to be one. And I’ve felt the north edge of a south air in March that had saw-teeth in every fold. You know what’s in that breeze from the east, and you turn up that side of

your coat-collar without experimenting any.

And I know — for haven't I stood sentinel over the ranches on both sides of the slope all these years? — I know that the East Wind's notion about the "joy" isn't altogether a false one. I've seen the stalwart, fresh-cheeked young fellows come out here from Pennsylvania and Indiana (wherever in the province of the winds those places may be), and I've watched them bend and shrivel and harden in the hot summers and sharp, bitter, changeable winters, until their shoulders were always stooped and they hadn't complexions any more — just hides. I've seen the fair Ohio lassies, bright-eyed, pink-cheeked girls, grow old and turn yellow-brown when they should

have been blooming still. It wasn't my prairie that did it. For when these went "back East" to visit they were many of them vigorous and buoyant against their old-time associates there. That is, if they still had old-time associates. Most men are living with their second wives, and women with their second husbands, "back East." You've noticed that. It's the fittest that survives back there. We're *all* the "fittest" here. But farm life has its same dull, hard side everywhere. The pleasure in it is as yet only a sort of dream. When people have learned all the lessons the trees may teach, they will find a joy in the heaviest work, and the real country life and the ideal will come nearer together. Then the bird's song will not suggest scare-

RUSTLING LEAVES

crows for the cherry trees, nor the lowing herds mean only milking-time.

The days ran into years, and the treadmill work on the farm was no lighter for Sam and Nellie than it was for their hard-working neighbors. Little children, their children, played about me. The farm was never so thrifty before. Flowers grew in the front yard now, and vines shaded the porches. The young love had ripened into that mature, thoughtful affection that makes the home the most enduring institution on earth. But the long days were full of duties, and leisure was an elusive delight just out of reach. Scant as their opportunity was, however, they both found time to read a little and to talk with each

other of what they had read. I saw less and less of Sam now. He seemed to have forgotten me. But one day I gathered from the children that their father had a new notion. Then I knew he would come here sooner or later; and he did. One Sabbath afternoon in the early fall he and Nellie sat at my feet and talked of their plans.

Sam had been making a study of minerals. I recalled then how the little red-topped school-ma'am had once said that he had a head for botany and geology and physics. I know these without a text-book, and I forget how little is the knowledge people have, tied as they are to printed pages. I found out now that between whiles in the hard work (the *betweens* are much shorter than the

whiles on the farm), Sam had been thinking and reading of what lay beneath the soil he harrowed every year. Now he was convinced that there was coal down by the draw. I knew it long ago. The alfalfa had found that out, and told it all over the place. But if people don't listen to trees, of course they can't hear the grasses.

However, the thing that made me shiver until my leaves clicked together like chattering teeth, was that the farm was to be leased and the family were to move to town.

For thirty years I had watched Sam daily come and go. I thought he belonged to me and I stretched out my arms to him in entreaty. At that moment I could have wished him buried at my feet, for then I could

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

have wrapped my roots lovingly around him. It was only for the moment, however, for I know too well that the ones I love are never buried in the soil. It is just the cast-off garment that men put there. *They* live on in the shelter of that Tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

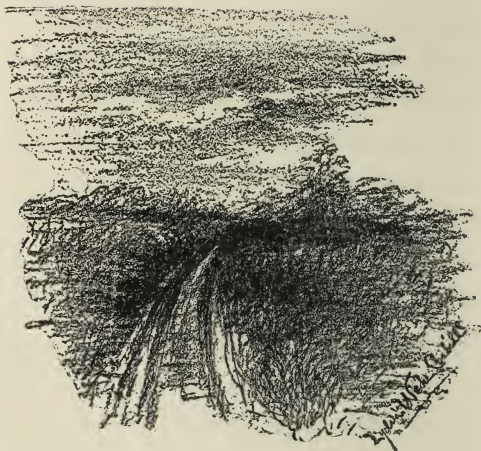
On the day the family left the farm, busy as Sam was, he stopped just one moment at the top of the swell and waved both arms at me as he had done when he was a little child on his way to the red school-house.

“Good-by, old tree — I’ll think of you every time I see your fuzzy cotton blowing about the streets.” Middle-aged man that he was, I caught the minor chord of sadness in his tone.

As for Nellie, she had cried very softly, woman-like, when she came up the evening before and stayed a moment in the twilight by my side. She didn't say anything to Sam about it. Women imagine that men forget where their loves began; and they generally do. It is only the women who remember. But I felt sure of them both, and I watched them as far as I could see them when they went down the long way toward their distant home.

When Sam first became a coal-dealer and contractor of coal lands, his competitors called him "the Missouri farmer," and ridiculed the notion of his success. That was because they didn't know Sam. In the country the neighbors missed him. A few called him a fool, while an-

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY



other few said he was too lazy to work, just like his father. That to them was the reason of this moving to town. These held the singular notion that the business man's life is one of easy comfort. They never understand the exacting anxiety of a merchant's day. It was only the few, however, who thought thus. The most of the countryside had found in Sam a friend and helper, and they were proud of him.

Sam made some mistakes and lost some money, but his farm had the genuine fuel in it, and as the years went by, his wealth and influence established themselves. He wasn't a millionaire, nor a social leader, nor a political "boss," but he gave and demanded a hundred cents on the dollar. He did not seek prominence,

and by-and-by it came to him as it sometimes does to the modest.

His older children were in the University now — that University their father once gave up. The younger ones were in the High School, or close up to it. As for Nellie, she found herself very much at home in the surroundings the city gave her. The farm, even the old cottonwood, became a part of the past. The neighbors complained a little of this, but I bided my time. Trees never hurry events. They are content to wait.

One day, when Sam's name had become one to conjure with in all the city and country hereabout, a shabby old covered wagon stopped before his handsome office. It was drawn by a horse and a mule just

like those that came out of Missouri long ago. In the front of the wagon sat a shabby old man and a forlorn old woman, while four little children peeped over their shoulders at the scene about them.

Sam knew them at a glance. It was his shiftless elder brother and his wife. These children must be some motherless grandchildren, Sam thought — as indeed they proved to be. The family had moved nine times since the death of the parents; had lived in Nebraska (they called it *Newbraska*) and Indian Territory and Iowa. They came now from Missouri, “to be near Sam, agin,” they said. Sam knew what that meant.

“Ye never had much sense,” the older man said, patronizingly, “but

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

ye've been so darned lucky ye kin afford to help us a leetle. We've never had no show. You got the farm, you know."

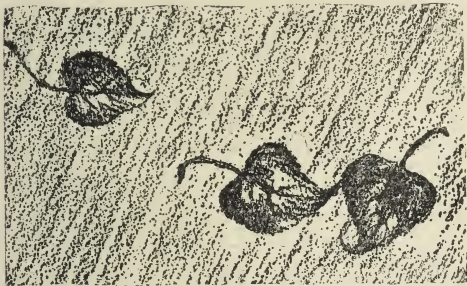
Sam thought unutterable things. Among them was of how his good-natured father had stinted the family each time a child left home, in order to buy out that child's interest in the home place. It was the only stroke of business in which the father ever succeeded, and that came at a price. Here now was the brother, old and ignorant. A wasted life behind him, and no capacity for bread-winning. What claim had he upon Sam? and, indeed, what could Sam do for him?

The younger brother in his comfortable prosperity resented this call upon him. He remembered only too

RUSTLING LEAVES

well the labor of mind and muscle that had gone into the building-up of his fortune. He would have been willing to give a large check to his relative and send him away. But that wasn't a part of the older man's idea. Sam was rich and owed him a living, and he meant to stay by Sam and feed on him.

A note was sent to Nellie, and the "outfit" turned toward his home. Then Sam locked himself in his private office to work out his problem alone.



Drifting Cotton.



AM'S mind went back to the dreary night when his brothers and sisters had called him an idiot because he wanted to go to school. How clear in his memory was the scene of that evening in the little dugout with its one tallow candle burning dimly on the table! At the thought of it Sam glanced up at the electric fixtures of his handsome chandelier above his polished oak desk. He remembered, too, the dirty floor, the unpainted chairs, the broken window-panes in the two little windows. But more than these he remembered the sneers and ridi-

cule from all of the family except his meek, indifferent father, and his own discouraged spirit unable to stand up against them. His eye fell now on the Brussels carpet, the leather upholstered couch, the sweep of curtains from the wide windows. He thought of his business rating and his social standing, of his growing wealth and promising future, of all the effort it had cost for him to reach the place he held now.

“I fought my battle out alone,” he said bitterly; “I don’t owe him anything. Why should I keep him? He’ll be a pauper soon enough without my help. I needn’t hurry matters for him.”

He gazed out at the open window, a firm, determined line settling deeper round his mouth.

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

“I’ll go down to the house and have it out with him,” he said deliberately. “It’s a brutish thing to do, and yet he’s past help from me. But—how about those little children?”

Just then a drifting fuzzy flake of my cotton sailed in through the open window and settled at Sam’s feet. He watched it dreamily, and his mind came back to me. The thirty years we had lived together passed before him in quick review. His lonely childhood, his longing for an education, his dumb sorrow when his parents lay dead, the sweet young love when Nellie and he stood by me in the warm evening-light,—all came back again at the sight of the silent swing of that zephyr-blown cotton.

DRIFTING COTTON

When he went home to dinner he said to his wife:

“Nellie, I’ll put my brother to looking after the teams down at the yards. It’s the only thing he can do. And they can live in that little property of ours over on Elm street. I’ve just lost a tenant from that place.”

So the elder brother settled himself for the rest of his days and took his good fortune as the payment of a debt long overdue.

Among the grandchildren of the family in the Elm street house was a round-eyed serious-looking boy, whose grave face and roly-poly body made an odd combination. Next to his “Gran’pop” this boy adored Uncle Sam. He used to steal into Sam’s office on rare occasions and

search through the scraps of paper in the big waste-basket, hunting for pictures. Sometimes he would take bits of blank sheets and with a piece of coal from the grate try to copy the designs and illustrations he found on the advertisements. When Sam found out what the child was doing he began to watch him closely, not because he fancied that the boy had any talent, but because he was interested in his efforts. One day he gave his nephew a box of crayons and tablets of clean drawing-paper, and so made himself a king in that little artist's eyes forever.

It was not to be expected that the elder brother would take kindly to his position, after the newness wore off. But his duties were light and not nearly equal to the price paid

for them, and inasmuch as he had never resisted ill-fortune he was not likely to put up a fight against better luck than he had ever known before. So he stuck to his place and grumbled at it. Along with his grumbling he assumed a patronizing air, and made Sam's business the subject of his dictation and criticism. His wife and three of the grandchildren, listening to this fault-finding, came to regard their landlord kinsman as a sort of robber, but the boy whose fingers were always black with charcoal only looked seriously surprised. He said nothing at all, and in his heart he clung to his Uncle Sam.

The next summer the ten-year lease on the farm expired, and Sam hesitated between flattering offers

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

for a re-lease and a downright sale of the place. While he was debating the matter with himself, loath to let the farm go out of his hands and favoring a new lease, a strange thing happened. The company that for nearly a year had been eagerly pressing its desire to contract a new lease suddenly sent a short, clear-cut withdrawal of its offer. It took Sam's breath away.

"I wonder why they did that?" he said to his secretary.

"I do not understand it at all," replied the secretary as he was leaving the room to do an errand.

"I do," spoke up Sam's nephew, taking his head out of the wastebasket into which he had been diving. "An old man came from the country last night with a letter for

DRIFTING COTTON

you, and told Gran'pop the coal on the farm was give all out. He said it was a secret, and he was comin' to tell you 'cause he wanted you to let it again if you wanted to. Gran'pop said he'd tell you himself, an' he took the letter the man had for you. But this mornin' he told Gran'ma he was goin' to tell them men that wanted to lease the farm himself. I said I was goin' to tell you, but Gran'pop said he'd lick me if I did, 'cause it wasn't none of my business. I didn't tell you, did I? But I come over here this mornin' to see that you found it out. Gran'pop says you are rich enough anyhow for a stingy man. But I don't think you are stingy. I just wish I could do somethin' for you, you are so good."

The child's face was grave and his

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

tones were so simple that Sam's heart warmed toward him more than ever.

Ten minutes later the delayed message from the farm confirming the boy's story, was sent up by one of the men from the yard. Hardly had it been delivered before the expectant purchaser of the land entered the office.

"I've come to close up our deal," he said. "If you sign with me before twelve o'clock I'll put another thousand on the price. I'm going to start East at two o'clock. It's to-day or not at all."

Sam was smarting under two whips. The ingratitude and trickery of the brother whom he had befriended stung him bitterly. The sudden failure of the coal supply meant a financial loss all the more

embarrassing because his expectations had been at the other extreme, and his business interests had adjusted themselves accordingly.

You wonder how I know all this? Have you ever tried to measure the area over which I send my children? All that they know I know, besides what the winds and the birds tell me. I had English sparrows nesting with me that season who had cousins in town. And what the English sparrows can't find out isn't worth a detective's efforts.

As Sam listened to the flattering offer a great temptation came to him. Why not sell the farm now? No official notice of the coal failure had reached him. He was not yet supposed to know of it. The farm was worth the price offered. There

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was a fortune in the soil if the rocks below had ceased to be productive. He had done a man's duty by his brother, and only evil had come of it. Was he not justified now in looking out for himself, especially since he alone knew that he was blamable? Nobody else could accuse him of double-dealing. Yes, he would close the deal at once. So the contract was begun.

As Sam turned to his desk to figure on some trivial feature of it, the other man remarked:

"Of course I wouldn't buy the place at all if it wasn't for the coal prospect. The farm's all right for a farm, but coal land's too plentiful not to have it, and that's the prettiest coal prospect I know of."

Sam turned cold. His figures lost

meaning. He forgot what he was trying to do, but he set his teeth firmly. The man would be East for two or three months. The condition of the mines could be announced late enough to cover him safely. He would go on now. The purchaser strolled to the window.

“Well, just look at that drift of cotton against the iron fence over there round the court-house!” he said. “Say, when that place out there is mine I’ll cut down all the cottonwoods the first thing I do. There’s a big one up above the house a ways that ’ll come down first. D’ you remember it?”

Sam did remember it, and his heart seemed to stop beating altogether. He walked to the window and saw the feathery cotton powder-

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

ing all the bluegrass of the courthouse yard, while a drift like the first soft December snow lay heaped against the stone foundation of the iron railing about the square. All the best impulses of his life, first put there by the little red-headed school-teacher long ago, and fostered by his own efforts, had been toward clean, honest living. This morning's work was the first dealing of which he was ashamed. Until to-day he had been genuine. Now he was becoming an alloy, one part of which made him blush.

So his heart came back to me, as I knew it would. Trees can wait. Out from his office, where the atmosphere was thick with temptation, his soul came again to the top of the old divide. The air is pure and

DRIFTING COTTON

sweet there, and a man may breathe his fill of it without fear of contagion. A mist was before Sam's eyes. He did not see the street, nor the buildings across the way, but a vision of sunlight glimmering on glossy leaves, and the droop and swell of wind-blown branches.

Turning to the table, he tore the contract into fragments.

"I can't sell the place," he said bluntly. "The deal is off."

The man stared at Sam. "So," he said, "the other fellows offer you a better thing in a lease, do they?"

"They don't offer me anything; they have withdrawn their offer," he replied.

"Then I think you must be a fool," the man said curtly.

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

"I know I am one," Sam responded. And the two separated.

Then came days and days of discouragement.

There was a fortune in the soil of that farm, as Sam had said, but the returns were slower than the proceeds from the coal-mining had been, even when growing alfalfa and fat thoroughbreds helped to swell the funds.

The story of Sam's loss soon spread, and his business credit suffered a more than temporary shock. But he looked up into the clear sky and thanked Heaven he was a free man. Yet the bitterness of rebuilding influence and fighting debt remained, until Sam wondered sometimes if he were not the only man whose life was just one battle. I

D R I F T I N G C O T T O N

know, of course, how few there are whose lives are anything else. And I know, too, how useless these few are to the world. If my boy had only come to me he would have found this out, but he was too busy to think of me.

Just when his business affairs were most embarrassed, a final struggle came. A delegation of his old neighbors called upon him one day in the interests of the new inter-urban electric line that was about to connect the north and south sides of the divide. The neighbors hadn't lost faith in Sam. He had lived among them. He had opened up their coal lands for them. They had gloried in his success, and they honored him for not re-leasing nor selling his farm when he might have

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

done one or the other easily enough. The truth about that leaked out somehow.

Sam was one of the local directors of this new road, and his voice meant his own and at least a dozen other votes on any phase of the business.

The proposed route lay along the east side of the highway. That fact had brought out the delegation. They wanted it changed to the west side. That would save the shade trees of a dozen farmhouses, including myself and others of our freehold. The local company preferred the east-side route because there were draws to bridge and fills to be made on the west route. It meant at least twenty or thirty thousand dollars

more expense. Naturally, they determined to avoid it.

Sam listened to the farmers and gave them his word to help them.

"I'll do all I can for you fellows; don't expect too much of me," he said. And they went away confident.

Close on their heels came a delegation representing the company. There were only three of them, and they talked with Sam behind locked doors. They knew his position and influence, the votes he could control. Very gently and adroitly they recognized, too, Sam's reversals and great need of money. The capitalists in the Eastern cities were ready to advance twenty-five thousand for the west side. It mattered nothing to them where the road lay. If Sam would find it convenient to throw his

force with them and build the east-side way, he would find ten thousand dollars ready for his use, and no questions put. What would be done with the other fifteen thousand they did not say, but Sam counted the three and knew how many times three is contained in fifteen and no remainder.

“Of course the farmers would kick about their trees,” they said. “That was to be expected. They’d kick about something else if they didn’t have that to fuss over. That was the way with farmers. But they were paid for their land,—a mighty good price, too, for that gumbo. And what were a few old cottonwoods to them anyhow? The air was full of their infernal fuzz now.”

So they talked, and Sam listened;

DRIFTING COTTON

and all the while my silvery cotton floated by the window. He did need money — never more than now. This sort of thing was practiced everywhere by local management — he knew that. But at the mention of “the fuzzy old cottonwoods” he brought his fist down like a sledgehammer on his polished oak desk. He had not fought with himself all these years to find the victory always hard to win.

“Gentlemen,” he said in a steady voice, “you may as well go home. I’m against you, and I’ll fight to a finish for the west route over the divide. You know where I’ll be when the votes are counted. You know what sort of a majority I can depend on. I do need money; you are right about that. But I’ve never

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

yet banked a dollar that was tarnished or that stuck to my hands, and I'm too old to begin that business now."

"More than that,"—his voice had just a half-tone's deepening,—“I stand for the trees, for their beauty and their shade. Gentlemen, you and I might live and die a few thousands richer than we are, but money value doesn't enter into the comfort those trees can give to the farmers' wives along our right-of-way, nor the delight and inspiration they are to the children. It is nearly fifty years since I came here out of a Missouri swamp. All the best impulses of my fifty years lead me back to one old cottonwood tree. It developed my muscles when I climbed it as a boy. It gave me an outlook on a

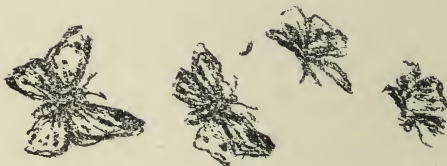
DRIFTING COTTON

landscape that put a wider horizon into my life. It sheltered me from the heat, it saved me from a winter's blizzard, and its drifting cotton has sailed in between me and temptation and kept my manhood for me. And when I die I ask for nothing better than that the musical rustle of cottonwood leaves shall sound above my grave and sing my requiem. You may call this notion of mine by any name you want to, and you may call me anything you choose, but don't forget that our right-of-way lies on the west side of that north-and-south road for the next twenty years, with the privilege of renewing the same for another twenty."

What the three men thought when they went away was what the pro-

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

spective purchaser of the farm had thought,—namely, that Sam was a fool; but this time he knew he wasn't.



Autumn's Gold.



LOOKING only on the selfish actions of men, it is hard to believe that honesty is the best policy; but the trees know it is a truth. We see the results that are ages in making. That's why we never get in a hurry and ask for ten rings of growth a year instead of one. Men want to double their size in a given time, and if they cannot do it they try to inflate themselves and then pad up the hollowness until they appear to do it anyhow. Sooner or later the sham size, the false growth, is known, and then the disgrace of it hangs on forever.

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

Sam had learned my lesson of waiting, and his clean life came at last to be

“his bond upon his bond.”

Fearlessness and business integrity bring their own reward, and the brand of solid metal was on his wares. Nobody went to him for plated goods.

The children came home from the University crowning his head with honors. They had vigor of character as well as of mentality, and their sound physical health fostered both. None of them inherited the old affection of the liver brought out of Missouri by the grandfather. Trees believe not a little in the mental stimulus against disordered livers, and there is nothing they abhor so much as hideous signboards plastered over

with advertisements of patent remedies for such disorders. But then trees have no livers.

The four grandchildren of the shiftless elder brother were not so fortunate as Sam's children had been, and they withered away one by one. Even the little artist nephew just turned sixteen before he died, leaving as a token of his one talent a picture of the tree his Uncle Sam had loved so long. It hangs above Sam's desk now, where he may see it every day. It would hardly take the water-color prize in its class at the Exposition, but what of that? Has not the "Master of all good workmen" set him at his masterpiece for all eternity?

When Sam's oldest boy, a graduate of the school of mines, came

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

home, he gave his father's farm a little study before going west to follow his profession.

"Father," he said one night, "your coal gave out one year, and we had to go to work for ourselves at school. That turned me from the notion of being a Greek professor to a study of mines. I thought then it was hard luck to have you fail us right in the closing of the sophomore year. 'Sophs' need so much money, you know. Mother wrote us it was God's providence the farm wasn't sold then, and I believe it now. Father, there's oil, millions of oil down those old coal-shafts. You saved a fortune for all of us when you didn't sell the farm.

"You'll be the richest man in the country yet, and then have plenty of

money for your illustrious son, the professor of mining business, and for his equally illustrious brother, hunting bugs down in South America. There are enough bugs in all conscience out here on the prairie to satisfy the most fastidious, without going beetle-hunting in Brazil. And there'll be money left over, too, for the third boy, who is going to Chicago to reform all the slums there. We're a gay lot of Missourians, diving after bugs and slums and the ill-smelling oil down in the mines. We reveal our plebeian stock clearly. But with money my sister can marry an earl. I guess a Missouri girl and an English Duke would match up all right with a good oil well to lubricate the machinery."

He rattled on gaily in the exuber-



John White Christie

ance of wholesome young life and promise, but the older man scarcely heard what he said. What Sam did hear was the feeble voice of his dying father saying, "You'll git your reward some day," and his own answer, "I've had my reward already."

All the young man's dream I knew would be realized, for the wealth was there. And now, day and night the black smoke rises in a column toward the sky, and the draw isn't a water-drainage any more. It's a stream of waste oil.

Up here I stand and watch the plain, and dream of the days gone by and of the days to come. How changed from the prairie of long ago, when the first settlers crept across it, is the fertile, busy, thrifty country-

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

side of to-day. This land to me is the fairest under all the dome of heaven. With the wealth that lies below the soil are the riches in it and upon it; the land that grows the best grain and the choicest fruit and the finest stock, and, most of all, grows *men* and *women*, no matter how poor and unpromising their first outlook on life may be. Here they develop and strengthen and ripen at last like the corn in autumn. I have loved it all since first I was tall enough to lift my head above the divide and look out upon it.

It is October now, and the splendor of yellow leaves is mine. The clear sweet air, the changing landscape, the glorious sweep of rainbow-tinted skies, the purple haze over the

AUTUMN'S GOLD

vanishing distances, and through all and all, the autumn's calm, the year's "well done" that fills with an ineffable peace the soul of him who can take it in,—these things belong to my days of golden leaves.

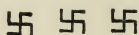
You see that white gravestone gleaming through the grasses at my feet? It marks the place where Nellie lies. No. Not Nellie, but the garb of flesh she wore on earth. It was just such a grand October as this when I lined her open grave with my leaves of shimmering gold, and dropped them on her coffin-lid.

Sam is a gray-haired man, vigorous and useful and strong in the autumn of his days. He too will come back to me in a little while, and another white stone will be planted at my feet. Men will laud his life and

THE COTTONWOOD'S STORY

honor his memory. His loved ones will mourn for him and long to have him here again. Only I, the old cottonwood, will bud and blossom and send my drifting, feathery cotton far and wide; will grow green in the springtime and golden in the autumn, and grieve not at all for Sam. His body will be where the shadows of my boughs will ruffle the waves of sunshine that sweep across the sod; but with the memory of his noble life graven deep in the hearts of all who knew him will run the Psalmist's legend:

"He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water; . . . his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."



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